



# St. Peter's School

*Lesser Slave Lake, AB*

The Lesser Slave Lake region of northern Alberta rose to prominence in the early 19th century when the fur trade flourished and posts were established at the west end of the lake, first by the Northwest Company in 1801 and then by the Hudson's Bay Company about 1815 (both amalgamated in 1821). Land and water routes, linking the Athabasca and Peace Rivers (via Lesser Slave Lake) with the Mackenzie River, provided early aboriginal peoples and subsequent fur traders and missionaries with access to important posts and settlements dotting this almost 3,000 km corridor from Fort Edmonton to the Arctic coast. The economic importance of the Lesser Slave Lake settlement, as it was first known, was assured when the HBC established its district headquarters here in the 1880s. Apart from the few white traders, new arrivals at "Slave Lake" included many Métis and smaller groups of native Chipewyan, Woodland Cree and Beaver peoples from the region.

By invitation of the HBC, Methodist missionaries served the region briefly in the 1840s. However, it was the Roman Catholic Church that was far more active at the time, arriving in 1846 and establishing the first permanent post, St. Bernard's Mission, in 1870 at the Lesser Slave Lake settlement. Many of the Métis who had settled here had been evangelized elsewhere by Roman Catholic missionaries. In 1909, the village was named Grouard, in honour of the well-known Catholic Bishop Emile Grouard, who served for 60 years in the region.

Anglican missionary activity followed in 1877 but it was not until 1887 when the permanent St. Peter's Mission and Day School was established at Kawpawon, or Kapowan (Cree for "landing"), at Buffalo Bay, about 5 km north of the Catholic mission. This location, at the extreme western end of Lesser Slave Lake, became a stopping point and staging area for travellers and freight destined for other missions north of the lake, such as the Anglican St. Andrew's Mission at Whitefish Lake (Atikameg) 50 km distant. These two missions, as well as St. John's at Wabasca (100 km northeast of Lesser Slave Lake), were closely connected and largely supported by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). They also fell under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Athabasca, which was formed in 1874 and encompassed all of Northern Alberta up to the 60th parallel. Rev. George Holmes was the Priest in charge at St. Peter's from its inception in 1887 to 1905, during which time he opened the Diocese's first residential school here in 1894.

In the months leading up to the Treaty 8 signing at Lesser Slave Lake settlement in 1899, there was considerable intrigue and political posturing by the two competing churches and native groups over how the latter should present themselves—either as "status" or "non-status." Status Indians were entitled to annual treaty payments and their children eligible to attend church run residential schools, which received a per capita grant. Those declaring themselves "half breed," such as the Métis, received a large one-time "scrip" payment (usually exchanged for land) and in doing so lost their legal status and right to send their children to government funded Indian residential schools. As events turned out, many Métis declared they were Native Indian and vice versa, depending on the appeal of the benefits offered. The Anglican missionary wanted the Métis to register as treaty Indians in order to keep them from the "scrip" land offered near the Roman Catholic mission, which would have had a great influence over its new neighbours.

Throughout the history of the Anglican Lesser Slave Lake Boarding School, much of the student body was indeed Métis, and thus ineligible for the usual grants for boarders. On discovering these demographics, the government declassified St. Peter's and made it a day school in 1909 and subject to reduced financial support. Rather than lose this funding, the Rt. Rev. George Holmes, recently installed Bishop of Athabasca, appealed successfully to Indian Affairs to have the boarding school grant transferred to the nearby St.

Andrew's School at Whitefish Lake which could accept more status Indian children. During these "day school" years, St. Peter's continued to accept unauthorized boarders and new funding was secured from private sources in England. By 1915, increased numbers of treaty children were enrolled at the Lesser Slave Lake school, prompting the government to reclassify it as a boarding school. Residential students never exceeded 20.

In 1923, control of St. Peter's Indian Residential School was transferred from the CMS to the Missionary Society of the Church of England in Canada (MSCC), whose agency the Indian and Eskimo School Commission took over most of the other similar Anglican schools in Canada. During the 1920s, residential enrolment at St. Peter's School comprised mostly non-treaty children and hence ineligible for

the usual per capita grants. MSCC struggled to fund the school, which was in poor condition. Indian Affairs preferred to construct a large new school at the St. Peter's site, large enough to also amalgamate the Whitefish Lake and Wabasca Schools, which were small and outdated. The Bishop of Athabasca opposed the plan, fearing the closing of the schools at Whitefish Lake and Wabasca would leave the surviving Catholic schools as the preferred institutions for children formerly enrolled at the Anglican schools. The status quo remained, ultimately forcing the Church to close the St. Peter's School in June 1932 due to its poor condition. Students, staff and salvageable furnishings were transferred to St. Andrew's School at Whitefish Lake for the commencement of the 1932-1933 school year.



# Milestones

- 1877 Anglican missionaries serve the Lesser Slave Lake area.
- 1887 St. Peter's Mission and Day School established at Lesser Slave Lake Settlement (Grouard).
- 1894 Lesser Slave Lake Church of England Boarding School opens and is expanded in 1896 to accommodate about 35 residential students.
- 1899 June 21 Treaty 8 signed at Lesser Slave Lake settlement. Native (Indian) and non-native (Métis) signatories and their descendents ("status" or "non-status" Indian) in future generations will shape the enrolment in the local residential and day schools, run by the competing Anglican and Roman Catholic missions.
- 1900 School expanded and given the name, St. Peter's Protestant Boarding School. Some of the 84 acres of church owned land are cultivated or used as pasture, providing school with source of food and schoolboys with farming experience.
- 1906 School accommodates 10 boys and 15 girls in residence after dormitory space is expanded.
- 1909 Government discovers most boarders are non-treaty Indian children and St. Peter's is classified as a "day school" with reduced funding. Native population on local reserves (source of authorized pupils) is declining due to disease outbreaks.
- 1915 St. Peter's is reclassified as a boarding school and per capita grants are restored, due to increased enrolment of treaty children. Government stipulates priority should be given to accommodating orphans and children from destitute native families.
- 1923 Indian and Eskimo School Commission of MSCC assumes operation of St. Peter's Indian Residential School, which reverts to taking in mainly Métis students. Sustained government funding is not forthcoming during 1920s.
- 1932 June 30 MSCC closes school and concentrates on running the two other Anglican schools in the region—St. Andrew's at Whitefish Lake (Atikameg) and St. John's at Wabasca. These schools receive increased per capita grants as enrolment is expected to rise. Most of the St. Peter's students and staff are transferred to Whitefish Lake School. Former school and mission property ultimately transferred to Province to be managed as a bird sanctuary and wetland.



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